

Book review „Old School, expanded edition (2014)“ by Ellis Amdur

After more than ten years, Ellis Amdur published now an expanded edition of his successful book “Old School”.



With a delay I have purchased it now as well and would like to contribute a review. Actually, this review has been written in german for my private blog but I guess it can't hurt to have an english translation out there.

With 400 pages it's quite a massive book. But pictures, paintings and diagrams ease up the text pretty well.

It has five parts which are divided in similar sub chapters. This makes for an attractive layout and it is fun to delve into it.

As most readers probably already know, Ellis Amdur is shihan of Toda-ha Bukô-ryû as well as of Araki-ryû. Both schools have their origins in the late Muromachi era (~1560/1580) and this is also the period for which he clearly has the most sympathy and the most intense emotions. It's safe to assume that he sees most ryû-ha created in the Edo period not really as “worthy” (although it looks like he makes an exception for the Takamura-ha Shindô Yôshin-ryû).

What I highly appreciate are the multiple references to the fact that koryû always have been political entities (even today). This is something still not well understood by many. He also mentions the fact that it is very unlikely that a certain line of a school

approaches a different line in order to seek some insights into lost content. This is hard to understand in Europe and the US where the idea exists it would be beneficial if all lines of a school work together in order to exchange content. But koryû just not work like that and the author describes this vividly.

Interestingly enough, the Tenshinshôden Katori Shintô-ryû takes up a big part of the book (two full chapters with 60 pages). Mr Amdur explains the technical background of the school and the six existing lines and he takes the liberty to make qualitative statements about them. Remarkably enough, the main source of information is (besides Otake Risuke-shihan) the Noda-ha Katori Shintô-ryû, a line which was unknown to me until now. Several times the author praises the superior and profound knowledge of this line. Very exciting!

Another, almost unknown fact of this school is, that in 1929 a university professor without martial arts experience married into the Iizasa family, took on the family name and became the 19th generation sôke. He was succeeded by his son who is now the 20th generation sôke.

Besides the Tenshinshôden Katori Shintô-ryû the book covers in detail a couple of other schools as well: For example the Maniwa Nen-ryû, Higo Ko-ryû, Yôshin-ryû and of course the author's own schools: Toda-ha Bukô-ryû and Araki-ryû.

In the context of a book that deals in such depth with koryû (technically and historically) it is quite amazing that Mr Amdur is not revealing the name of his Araki-ryû teacher. He makes a point in describing this gentleman as a "private man" and anyone who likes to discuss this is invited to contact the author.

At least, it makes for a pretty good "mystery" which Mr Amdur acknowledges.

The author tries his best in giving the reader as much historical background information as possible. However, I had to rely on my own knowledge quite a few times in order to connect some dots. With this in mind the book can be recommended to people with enough know-how and experience in this field. But I would not suggest it as a starting point to a newbie as a fair deal of knowledge is expected.

Now I come to the main part of my review: The book's examination of the Edo period in general and especially the Bakumatsu era.

The readers of my blog are well aware of the fact that my attention is focused on the Bakumatsu era and the schools that have been founded around this time. Here I am as emotional and sympathetic as Mr Amdur is about the Muromachi era.

Let's start with the scope. For the chapter which interested me most (Bugei in the Edo Period: The rise of competitive martial sports) there are just 15 pages foreseen. It almost looks like a pure token. This can be even seen in the text itself which lacks completely Mr Amdur's fascination which is so visible in the rest of the book. Therefore,

it's not a surprise that certain mistakes slip in and important facts (wittingly or unwittingly) being omitted.

For example the fact that many members of the Maniwa Nen-ryû (a school from the Muromachi era) haven't been from the bushi class is described as something highly valuable. But the similar fact for "new" schools in the Bakumatsu period is almost a proof of their degeneracy.

Let's stick a bit with the Maniwa Nen-ryû: The book speaks very highly and very romantically about the *kiriwara jiai* in this school. This is the free sparring part which is fought with fukuro shinai and padded gloves and headgear. Apparently this was introduced in this school sometime during the 18th century. According to Mr Amdur there is no scoring, no defined targets and it's just an added training tool (that looks very familiar to me...). But entirely different is the Gekiken practice in the 19th century (again according to the author): Degenerated to pure mock martial sports competition! Too bad it went unnoticed completely that there always have been many different kinds of Gekiken and that the main purpose also was the use as an added training tool. I feel such lines of argument are not worthy an author of Mr Amdur's standing.



Kiriwara jiai: The „good“ Gekiken

Interestingly, he picks off the Hokushin Ittô-ryû to make a few examples. Shall we have a look?

- A couple of times he refers to the founder of the school (Chiba Shûsaku) as “commoner” (non-bushi). That's not really defamatory but in the context of the Japanese family law of that time just not correct. It is true that not much information exists about the early years of Chiba Shûsaku. His father was from the Tôhoku region and was later adopted by his swordsmanship teacher, Chiba Narikatsu (and with it became a bushi). Therefore, his son Shûsaku grew up naturally as samurai. Adult adoption was a standard legal tool in those times, for example to carry on a famous family name. The direct bloodline was never of

paramount importance in Japan (see the mentioned example about the sôke of the Tenshinshôden Katori Shintô-ryû in the 20th century). Does anyone really think these circumstances are not known to such a notable “researcher” as Ellis Amdur?

- In a noteworthy paragraph Mr Amdur tries to depict it as if Chiba Shûsaku was just proficient with a shinai. The naive reader must come to the conclusion that Chiba Shûsaku never had a bokutô in his hands, let alone a real sword.
- The new schools of the Bakumatsu period are reduced throughout to “shinai uchikomi”, which is called without exception “competitive (martial) sports”. It is correct that from the mid of the 18th century kata-geiko training was more and more criticized, also because many schools invented new kata without any real application (which is justifiably slammed by Mr Amdur). But the book neglects the fact that the basis even of the new schools always has been kata-geiko too and Gekiken was just a different training area.
- There is no indication whatsoever that even many of the new schools offered an extensive and broad education and curriculum, e.g. beside Kenjutsu also Iaijutsu, Naginatajutsu, Jûjutsu, Kodachi and more in different compositions depending on the schools.
- Mr Amdur mentions that for example the Hokushin Ittô-ryû was well-known for its use of pretty long shinai and “strange” techniques developed of this, e.g. katate tsuki (extended one-handed thrusts) and that “something like this is nearly impossible with a katana”... Yes, this is the same author who claims to put to test his own schools and even changes the design of weapons if suitable.
- Anyway, there is far too little background knowledge shared in relation to the political and social circumstances of the Bakumatsu era. At times it appears as if Mr Amdur writes about the schools of that period in complete isolation, detached from the conditions of that age. Probably this is owed to the fact that there was just not more space in the book left.

And then comes the last chapter about Keppan.... And here Mr Amdur writes some truly beautiful things about loyalty in a koryû, about Omote and Ura, about Reigi in a real dôjô or even about the natural rivalry between schools.

These are exactly the things I experience in one way or the other in our school and which gives me the certaintiness to be at the single proper place there.

Conclusion: I am really on the fence here...

Mr Amdur stays true to the "tradition" of Donn F. Draeger (way more than what I've anticipated). Draeger was the person who popularized knowledge in the west about koryû from the 1960s on. But he had as well a very bossy black-and-white thinking concerning japanese martial arts: Everything before 1600 was the real deal and deadly battlefield-tested martial science whereas everything after was highly degenerated and just a pale imitation of the divine systems from old times. Apparently, Mr Amdur has as well difficulty to differentiate.

Don't get me wrong, I do not consider this book as poor quality, quite the opposite. It's very well written (sometimes outright beautifully) and offers some light-bulb moments (especially in the Keppan chapter). But it is also clearly written with bias towards systems and schools which hail from the Edo period.

Who knows, there might be a third edition down the road. One with a different focus, probably more serious and profound on the Edo period. But this might be doubtful given that even this second edition was a big effort and took more than ten years.

On the other side, the question arises if Mr Amdur would be the right person to represent such a focus sincerely.

Let's wait and see... 😊